Nixon Files Building Still Largely Unused

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Associated Press

A building for which the government traded $19.5 million worth of property remains mostly empty a year later, the chairman of the House Government Operations Committee said yesterday.

Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.) made public a summary of a report on an investigation made by the General Accounting Office at his request.

The building is located in Laguna Niguel, Calif., and had been intended as the site for a $110,000 vault that was to be used for storing the tapes and papers of former President Nixon.

Congress rejected this plan, however, and in the process overturned the agreement between Nixon and the administration for storage of the papers. Ownership of Nixon's presidential papers is still in dispute before the courts.

GAO concluded that the General Services Administration, the government housekeeping agency that arranged the exchange, violated no laws. Congressional approval is required for property acquisitions involving appropriations of more than $500,000 but the requirement does not apply to property exchanges.

The building was constructed by a defense contractor, Rockwell International Corp., but before its completion in 1971 Rockwell decided to dispose of it, Brooks said.

After failing to arrange a private sale, he said, Rockwell opened negotiations with the GSA and finally arranged a trade for property appraised by the government at $19.5 million, but Rockwell later obtained a $27.3 million appraisal.

The building the government acquired, Brooks said, had been described by the Office of Management and Budget as a white elephant and "a building in search of a mission," but OMB finally approved the acquisition.

Brooks said the GSA made elaborate efforts to interest government agencies in using the building, but as of last fall, little more than a third of its space had been committed and nearly all of this was for GSA's own use in storing records.

The building is also being used to store some 1,300 cubic feet of Nixon's pre-presidential papers.

The papers and historical materials from 1946 to 1968 were donated by Nixon for eventual storage in a Nixon library.